

The dead Left: Trotskyism

The Platypus Historians Group

"One cannot separate the ability to know the world from the ability to change it, and our capacity to change the world is on a very small scale compared to the heroic days of the Communist International."

—James Robertson, founder of the Spartacist League (U.S.), "In Defense of Democratic Centralism" (1973)

Zombies and Sectarians

What does it mean to say, as Platypus does, that "the Left is Dead?"

It represents the desire for a *tabula rasa*, for a start from scratch. It is the admission that there is no living tradition, no movement to join in the Marxist Left; That it has been defeated and that it has self-destructed. It means that the Maoisms and Trotskyisms that today stumble around like zombies in the form of tiny sectarian groups have either given themselves to dishonestly cheerleading for the Green and Democratic parties or simply have become antiquarian societies reciting old revolutionary pieties with the mechanical enthusiasm of Hare-Krishna monks; While at the same time the "radicals" and "anarchists" that prescribe dropping out of society by building "alternative communities" outside of capitalism have rationalized their powerlessness into a lifestyle that poses as politics.

The Left is dead—and whatever undead elements of it continue to stagger among us deserve to be put down before they demoralize and stupefy a new generation.

But it must be said: calling for the end of a previous model of Leftist politics is nothing new. Both the "down with the old, in with the new" and the "return to fundamentals" move is familiar on the Left. Examples of this abound in academia—but also in the militant Left, with examples such as the rejection of Soviet Marxism that characterized the New Left of the 1960s and the "return to Lenin" or "return to Marx" theories of Western Maoist groups in the same era. Also, worst of all, from the false sense of "emancipation" and "freedom from the past" that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the "death of communism" gave to most on the self-described Left—a sense of triumphalism that is still with us.

For a Left that has gone from its death agony to its rig- or mortis while fighting the good fight, the wish to escape the past has meant the willingness to repeat its mistakes; either by the unreflective disowning of past failures (e.g., New Left anti-communism) or simply by tailing behind events too large to control or influence (post-soviet triumphalism). To reach for the new without having mastered the old is an indication of a desire to close one's eyes to the way that the past continues to haunt the present, wrestling it from our control.

For these reasons, Platypus looks at the past neither as something to turn away from nor as a tradition to uphold. Instead we see it as the set of failures which have determined our own existence and our own project. We

see our task as the investigation of these failures, from the most obtuse ones to the most brilliant ones, for the purpose of critically considering the possibilities for Left-ist politics today.

With this in mind, we have offered a set of starting points and critical positions that that have met with hostility and accusations from the walking-corps-Left. Our interest in rescuing the deep roots of Marxist thought in the high liberalism of thinkers like Kant and Hegel has made us mere "liberals" in the eyes of the undead. For them, we simply cannot truly be "radicals," since we don't reject "bourgeois ideology" *tout court*.

A more interesting accusation has taken place when zombie sectarians such as the ISO and the Spartacist League have called us "pro-imperialist" and "neo-conservatives" in response to our critique of the dishonesty, nihilism and stupidity of the American and European anti-war movements. These movements, we have argued, have tended to fall into support for the "war as bad business" anti-war argument of the Democratic Party—or worse, have tacitly supported the fascist, right-wing forces that oppose the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan. The possibility of explaining both the nature of today's American imperialism and the (all too sane) demented politics of the Islamist opposition to the US in a single unitary critique of present social reality seems to be beyond the perspective of the dwindling anti-war movement and the sectarian "revolutionary" groups that cling to this movement for dear life.

There is a bit of historical irony in that the authoritarianly Manichean worldview of today's "Left," labels anyone who raises any of these concerns a "neo-con." Ironic because the emergence of neo-conservatism was indeed an artifact of the Left's own self-destruction, since the initiators and first followers of this tendency were Left-liberals and ex-Trotskyists that had come to reject a "Left" that by the 1960s had little to offer but the unviability of Moscow on the one hand, and, on the other, the New Left's refusal to think.

Second International Radicalism and Trotsky:

"The last man standing"

The third label Platypus gets branded with is the most interesting one, and the one closest to the truth: that we are Trotskyists.

In fact, Platypus is in no way a Trotskyist organization, but we think that Leon Trotsky's thought and the heroic—and losing—struggle that he fought after his exile from the Soviet Union are necessary for an understanding of the thwarted potential for emancipation represented by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

Trotsky and his project in exile represented "the last man standing" of a kind of historical consciousness that we in Platypus have come to refer to as Second International radicalism. This was the consciousness of a political task in a specific moment in history that is best

represented by the names Lenin, Luxemburg, Korsch, Liebknecht, and Trotsky: all of them dissenting members of the conservative Second Socialist International. During the lead-up to the First World War, the Second International, having the largest membership it had ever had, recoiled from its avowed commitment to proletarian revolution: Each member party of the International supported their government's war effort. Second International radicalism, instead of seeing in the war an unfortunate event out of its control, saw it as precisely the crisis of the capitalist system that indicated an opportunity for proletarian revolution. It was a crisis in which the growth of the contradictory forces of capital gave birth to a series of imperialist conflicts that culminated in the largest war mankind had ever seen. With the international bourgeois order in disarray and a powerful workers movement, the Second International radicals thought that it was the moment for the insurrectionary struggle that would topple bourgeoisie's rule.

This understanding of the situation was what led Lenin's Bolsheviks to take power in October of 1917, after a workers' and soldiers revolt, triggered by Russia's defeats in the war, succeeded in ousting the Tsar. This was also what led Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary party, the Spartakusbund to attempt, and fail, to grab hold of the leadership of the proletarian revolution in Germany in 1918-19.

For most of the Second International socialists, Lenin's coup was an irrational gamble. And a gamble it was—though not wholly irrational. In the vision of Lenin and Trotsky, the Soviet Union was meant to be merely a foothold into the crisis of the War, a foothold that would come into fruition *only if* proletarian revolts took power in other Western European nations. This was necessary because it was certain that as soon as the Bolsheviks established their regime, the imperialist governments that surrounded them would attack and easily destroy it. This attack in fact happened, when Germany, Britain and Japan lent their support to the various right-wing military coups that were attempting to take down the Bolsheviks after 1918. And since revolutions across Europe that the Bolsheviks so desperately needed either did not take place or were violently put down—as in the case of Germany—the Bolsheviks saw themselves forced to fight tooth and nail to stay in power.

They were—miraculously—not destroyed. But holding on to power had its cost. The regime was isolated. After Lenin's death, despite the attempts of Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition to steer the Soviet Union back into a world-revolutionary perspective, Stalin was able to take complete control and lead the regime into capitulating and accepting "socialism in one country" by 1928. This was a policy that destroyed any kind of revolutionary perspective by making the Soviet Union into a nation state whose condition of permanent social and economic crisis forced the growth of a bloody, repressive, totalitarian bureaucratic regime.

From his exile in 1928 to his assassination in 1940 Trotsky struggled to build a movement from outside of the Soviet Union whose aim would be to strengthen non-Stalinist international communism around the world and to rescue the Soviet Union from its conservative regime. His movement, which came to be known as the Fourth In-

ternational, despite a growth of membership in the United States and France, was too weak to really take off, and after Trotsky's death suffered splintering and disorganization—a process of decay that slowly transformed Trotsky's movement into the petty and squabbling, cultish and hysterical, Trotskyism of today.

Trotsky was not only the single political figure that was able to maintain a revolutionary perspective of the Second International radicals in a time of reaction. He was also the last surviving exemplar of the revolutionary political consciousness produced by what was arguably the single moment in history up to date when the transition to socialism was a real possibility: 1917-1921. By the 1930s Lenin was dead, Luxemburg and Liebknecht had been brutally murdered, Karl Korsch had become fervently anti-soviet, and Georg Lukacs, the most important theoretician of this moment, had weakened and adapted himself to Stalinism. Only Trotsky and his movement stood—in exile and with little power—without succumbing to either of the two dominant perspectives on the Soviet Union of the time. The first one was support for Stalin's conservative, Thermidorian regime. The second, the kind of liberalism that in observance of the need of democracy and human rights, wished to see a restoration of bourgeois rule in the regime.

For Trotsky, the fight against Stalinism was the fight to make the Soviet Union a revolutionary force once again. The fight to preserve the Soviet Regime and avoid the restoration of bourgeois rule was necessary, since, as he predicted, such restoration would only bring about a right-wing dictatorship. Something that in fact belatedly came true in the form of Vladimir Putin's ominous hold over Russia today.

If a deepening of the contradictions of capitalism and an increase in the possibility of socialism can be traced in a line that goes from the European Revolutions of 1848, to the Paris Commune of 1871, to the founding of the Second Socialist International in 1891, to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917; and if this line is only broken by a line of regress brought into being by the World Wars, Nazism and the Cold War; then Leon Trotsky's political consciousness can be seen as the last vestige of a Left not yet in decay. Trotsky's movement was thus the last exemplar of a movement that was the highest expression in theory and practice in emancipatory politics since Marx.

This is the Left that informs Platypus's critique of the present.

Trotsky-ism in Regression

But doesn't this estimation of the history of the Left leave us only the option of becoming a Trotskyist organization like the ones whose mode of operation these days is to accost hapless protesters with shrill accusations of Menshevism before asking them to buy their newspaper for a dollar? If the tradition behind Trotskyism is in fact the richest one in emancipatory politics, why is the Trotskyism of the present so rotten?

We would indeed be in a great place politically if, as some of the necro-sectarian Trotskyists of today claim, what we needed to do was simply to build a Leninist proletarian party. But in the era of decline of opportunities for emancipatory politics that began in the 1930s and

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the discussion had the idea of doing something right after Election Day. She said we should protest, and we responded that we couldn't protest the first black American president, but perhaps we could have teach-ins. I am not sure whether it was Dave or I who had the idea for the Hundred Days campaign. At the same time people from Chicago were starting to talk about doing student actions together, and even a week of action was mentioned in those early conversations. We finally came together because we had the same goals; they had just been written a little differently.

LR: I know perfectly well who those people were, Pam Nogales, Greg Gabrellas and Ben Shepard, I remember them coming back and telling us about the Left Forum conversation. Now, as you and I already know our proposal did not pass at the national convention, although we did have majority support. We are still working on getting full SDS support and trying to get it passed by the new national working committee. Why do you think this campaign should be a national SDS priority?

RH: In order to become a viable student organization and powerful force for social change we must be relevant to the elections. How many thousands of students are getting excited about the elections, voting for the first time and getting involved in politics for the first time? I worked on the Nader campaign in 2000, and I remember a couple of people with buttons and pins. But now on the subway in New York I see thousands of Obama pins everywhere. You do not see McCain pins everywhere. You never saw Bush pins or Kerry pins everywhere. It's a social phenomenon that's really coming from a grassroots base. I've seen bake sales for Obama. There is an incredible development of grassroots fundraising; about 90% of his donors are from small contributions, although about 55% of the money he is getting is from corporations. People hear a great message of hope and change. We also want change, we know that this society isn't working and we want to propose alternative solutions that go beyond electing someone to take our power away. So for lack of a better word, we have to capitalize on this. If we don't do the Hundred Days campaign we might be a larger organization, but we wouldn't have changed much.

LR: I also felt that the Hundred Days campaign will allow us to reach out to newly politicized students nationally. If we get full SDS national support for the Hundred Days campaign and succeed in making the two weeks of action happen, what visible changes and benefits can we expect for SDS?

RH: It will push SDS to organize at another level. That's why we really have to push the campaign, because the campaign is the best way to build a relevant national organization. We will learn how to talk with different people, how to bring people into our organization, and how to collaborate with different kinds of organizations. We need to make our organization accessible and appealing

to new people, and slowly integrate them into the process on the basis of their skills and interests. We need to bring people in through the discussions that politicized us. We need to meet students where they are at. Beyond working with students, it is absolutely essential to work with other organizations that build other social movements. We don't have the ability to organize workers, but we need coalitions with organized labor and its base. SDS needs to develop into a force for change on the national scene, capable of keeping the Obama presidency accountable and responding when it fails. I think this campaign is a great beginning, because it provides the opportunity to build coalitions and friendships with other groups with the long term goal in mind of gaining political power.

LR: After the Hundred Days, how will we be able to judge the success of this campaign?

RH: If we have developed working relationships with other organizations that would be a success. Also, being able to figure out what could have improved so that we can do better next time. Knowing that SDS can be part of something big, knowing that we don't have to lead it, but that we can be a part of shifting this country to the left, that would also be a success.

LR: I want to pull away from the campaign, and look at the big picture in the form of a comparison with SDS in the 60's and SDS now. What do you think are some of the most pressing unresolved problems that SDS faced in the 60's that we still face in the present?

RH: Well, first, it's still predominantly white. A couple of different things come to mind. There are a large amount of students in SDS now who are enamored with the 60's, who fetishize it, specifically the Weather Underground, and all of their tactics. I believe that the conditions of capitalism have greatly changed since the 60's movement. We're in a kind of contradictory situation because the SDS in the 60's has this great legacy that gives us energy and provides a lot of potential. But it is also a burden. People repeat the same mistakes just because the 60's were cool. They do these tactics because SDS in the 60's grew so big. But it failed. Now, under the different conditions of capitalism, we are still repeating the same tactics, and expecting different results—being in a counterculture that's into drugs and having orgies and trying to make SDS cool again. I don't see people learning from the lessons of the past, realizing that although SDS grew a lot, it failed. Those tactics might work for a little while, but we need to have long term strategies. We need to build a movement for the long haul that can be about students getting involved in alternative politics.

LR: What is your vision of SDS in 5 years?

RH: I would like to see SDS become a recognized national

organization building a democratic society. There has been a lot of emphasis on tearing things down, with the proposals presented at the national convention like "stop l-69", or stopping the war, instead we need to start building something that can replace capitalism. Let's build a democratic structure that can mirror the society we want to see developed. I want to see SDS building a movement that teaches people how to organize SDS on campuses across the nation, including in technical schools. We must be a cool, sexy organization that is at the same time efficient at involving new people, and getting them active in campaigns that can achieve immediate short term goals while building something bigger. SDS has to have a place for political discussions, but also has to have a place to be social, and talk about music. We need to be an organization that can train people to do grassroots organizing, and that can sustain itself while it grows and changes.

LR: Would you like to add a closing remark?

RH: I am really excited about the Hundred Days campaign, although we have a lot of work ahead of us. Whether national SDS endorses it, the chapters that partake in the campaign are going to become huge and develop the ability to work with other groups. Those chapters are going to be really powerful, and this campaign will potentially allow them to participate in social change in their areas. I know that's where I am going to be putting all of my energy.

Postscript—LR

After conducting this interview, I now realize that there are terms we on the Left commonly use, and more often than not, take their meaning for granted. For example, I have no doubt that Rachel Haut and I have different ideas of what terms like "ideology," "democracy," "radical," "anarchist" or "socialist" mean. The term "democratic" most clearly expresses this problem in SDS. The result is that both sides of a disagreement can claim to have democratic principles on their side. This represents a larger problem for the Left. We have inherited terminology like "alienation," "oppression," "Marxism," and "liberalism" without a sufficient understanding or agreement about what these terms may mean today. Worse, we have even lost the desire to clarify those terms for ourselves and for each other, often opting for neologisms and neglecting clarification. This clarification is necessary if we wish to advance the possibility of social transformation. The largest and most troubling term we face is "capitalism," because how we develop our anti-capitalist movement depends on our understanding of what we aim to overcome. If we don't clarify the full and complex meaning of these opaque terms for ourselves, it will mean that although we are working together we may not be working for the same goals. Then, all the Left is building is its own Tower of Babel. I ask my fellow SDSers, and those on the Left more broadly, to use the *Platypus Review* as a place to develop a clarification of these terms and, more importantly, our goals.

Intersectionality, continued from page 1

As an able-bodied, working class white male with academic training, who does not work in the academy, if I want to think intersectionally, it requires a willingness to undergo personal transformation. I must be willing to listen to others, learn from others, and then let that knowledge change the way I see the world, which changes me. This goes for all people who occupy advantageous positions in the nexus of intersecting oppressions. Able bodied people must be transformed through experience of disabled people, while people must be willing to be transformed by the experiences of nonwhite people, men must be willing to be transformed by the experiences of women, straight people must willing to be transformed by the experience of queer folk, and gay folks must be willing to be transformed by trans folk.

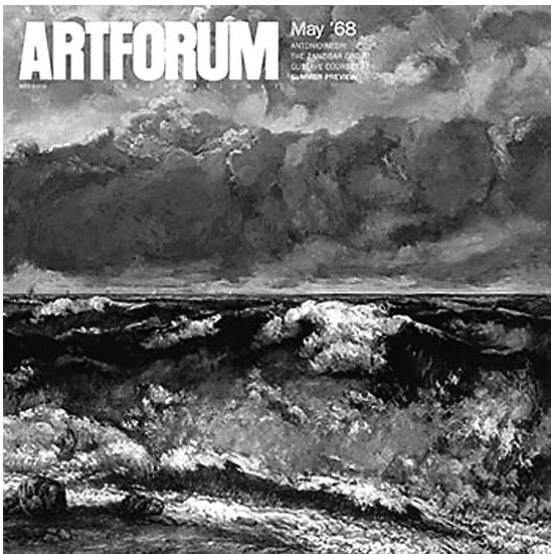
This is hard for many reasons. Two reasons are that it requires a high level of personal development and that we be objective. Empathy, one of the hallmarks of practicing love, requires that we be objective. If we are not objective, we can never understand the other's position and therefore cannot possibly extend ourselves for the purposes of theirs, or our growth. According to Erich Fromm, "The faculty to objectivity is *reason*, the emotional attitude behind reason is that of *humility*. To be objective, to use one's reason, is possible only if one has achieved an attitude of humility, if one has emerged from the dreams of omniscience and omnipotence which one has as a child." Fromm goes on to say that because love requires the absence of narcissism, in order to practice love, we must practice "the development of humility, objectivity and reason. One's whole life must be devoted to this aim. Humility and objectivity are indivisible, just as love is. I can not truly be objective about the stranger, and vice versa. If I want to learn the art of loving, I must strive for objectivity in every situation, and become sensitive to the situations where I am not objective. *I must try to see the difference between my picture of his behavior, as it is narcissistically distorted, and the person's reality as it exists regardless of my interests, needs and fears.*" [1]

Fromm's suggestion that I see the difference between my picture of the other's behavior and their behavior as it exists objectively, detached from my interests, needs and fears, is a prerequisite to thinking intersectionally because intersectional thinking requires that we embrace difference by listening from others experience, learning from that experience, then letting it transform us and the way we see the world. **IP**

Matthew Birkhold is a Brooklyn based writer and educator. He can be reached at birkholdatgmaildotcom.

1. The Art of Loving, p. 101, emphasis added

May '68, continued from page 2



Artforum: May '68

basing their politics on the affirmation of this "rupture," the so-called radicals of '68 missed an opportunity to consciously shape their historical moment. Instead, their historical moment shaped them. They ended up accepting the ideological confusions and social degradation wrought by the breakdown of the welfare-state form of capitalism, and adjusted their politics accordingly.

This accounts for why the essayists cannot help but to portray the narrative of the actual practices of 1968 as reckless posturing and festive abandonment, despite their claim to have historically advanced political theory. In his reflections on the student revolt at Columbia, Danto recalls an incident when he tried to negotiate the release of Harry S. Coleman, a dean of the school held captive in his office by students occupying the building. When Danto attempted to argue that it was wrong to hold Coleman hostage, he was howled out of the scene. Before leaving a group of students told him that he "didn't understand what was happening, that this was the *revolution*"—an assertion repudiated within days, when the police cleared the building. Lotringer, also tells a story of the Parisian events contraventional to the achievements in theory. He writes that "They [the French students] stole France, took it for a joyride, and then just as suddenly, dropped it in a back alley with no more than a few scratches." In other words, the actual events of 1968, whether in New York or Paris, were characterized by a complete lack of goals and a delusional sense of strength. Nevertheless, Lotringer assures us that "May '68 left a lasting trace: From its ashes arose the most vital political theories to emerge in the West over the past half century, as if the political creativity of the French May, thwarted in every other way, found in philosophy its most potent outlet."

But this begs the question of the relation between theory and practice.

The underlying premise informing all of *Artforum's* essayists is that 1968 represents an unprecedented and unique political event which, as Negri argues, ruptures historical continuity. Thus, they affirm the same false sense of "progression" that lead students in '68 headlong into the streets to confront the human masks of unknown and unalterable forces; and who, upon being beaten back, nonetheless claimed victory for having elucidating the limits of the ability to change the world. To avoid this painful problem the *enragés* of May '68, and their disciples today, reinvent politics along the edges of the shattered pieces of their smashed practice. Upholding this fractured arrangement to be a theoretical breakthrough they lose contact with a fundamental aspect of Marxian critical theory—the ability to recognize continuity in change and change in continuity. It is this blindness that accounts for their inability to see in the *"sui generis"* political event of '68 the imprint of the ongoing destruction of theory (Stalinism and Cold-War Social Democracy), and it accounts for their blindness to the fact that in 1968's inept revolutionary practices laid the seeds for the future (today's) degradation of politics. Consequently the relation between consciousness and practice is obscured by contemporary theory, which has the effect of dissolving theory into aporia and accommodating practice to a degraded reality. Theory becomes affirmative of a reality it cannot consciously affect, and therefore cannot understand. Instead of considering this complicated and still growing problem, the authors opt for the introduction of abstruse categories to re-imagine the antecedent class-conscious theory: for example, "multitude" (Negri), "youth as a class" (Lotringer), "cognitive labor" (Raunig), "difference" (Gitlitz), "heterotopia" (McDonough). These categories are not difficult to concretely grasp because the political philosophy situating them is so advanced; instead, their conceptual fuzziness and lack of political specificity result from the failure to discern the actual depth and contours of the problem.

Thus to Griffin's suggestion that we have lessons to learn from 1968's continued significance, we say: the only lesson worth learning is how not to repeat the past. *Artforum's* example shows us that remaining beholden to 1968 offers no way out of the mire it created through its political impotence and confused beliefs. Griffin may be correct in pointing out that a "pro" versus "con" framework for understanding 1968 is inadequate because it assumes an anachronistic condition of possibility—that one could somehow choose or reject what has already transpired. Yet we can still reject '68 as our model of "progress," whether in theory or practice. For the critic of today's barbarism, this is an essential lesson in brushing history "against the grain." **IP**

Obama, continued from page 1

Obama has not claimed to be anything but a typical Democrat. Despite burnishing credentials as a "communit- y activist" in Chicago when running for Illinois State Senate, Obama has not presented himself as a "movement" candidate, despite what many may wish from him—to pin their mistaken hopes on this or else find him wanting. It seems that the idea of an entirely "mainstream" (i.e., conservative) black political candidate is beyond the imagination of most on the "Left."

So we are treated to some "shocking exposés" of Obama as a supposed product of the "Chicago School" of neo-liberal economic policy (of the former University of Chicago Professor of Economics Milton Friedman)—see for example Naomi Klein on "Obama's Chicago Boys," June 12, 2008, in *The Nation*, and various articles in *Counterpunch*—as if any president of the U.S. today would do anything but pursue post-Fordist/neo-liberal policies!

The candidacy and election of Obama will continue to send the "Left" into a tailspin, and in this sense will be "bad" for the Left—but this is Obama's greatest value.

Hitherto, the "Left" has expected that black politicians should either "represent"—or even "lead"—a fictive black "community." Conversely, black Republicans have been demonized for being sell-outs or otherwise "race traitors." It has been a fundamentally racist imagination that denies that black Americans can run the entire spectrum of policy positions and therefore social politics.

As witnessed with Obama, the racist illusion that seems to die the hardest is the notion that black people are especially insightful let alone "progressive" in their outlook on American society. It is an old canard on the "Left"—somewhere between wishful thinking and demagogic propaganda—that the most oppressed are somehow the most critically conscious of social realities. Behind this spectacular illusion the "Left" has spun, however, has been the more prosaic realities of the Democratic Party and the role of "black" politics in it.

Because American politics has been about the struggle for inclusion in the power structure by successive waves of various immigrant and other marginalized groups, it has been perhaps the most destructive illusion that the Democratic Party, which has played the inclusion game of its constituency politics better (especially in urban machine politics) than their Republican rivals, is somehow to the Left socially or politically.—As Gore Vidal once put it, American politics is really a one-party affair, the "party of property," with "two Right wings." The Democratic Party is simply the party that tends to include the interests of parvenu bourgeois elements from non-WASP groups, along with perhaps some of the more enlightened WASPs. "Black politics" has been part of this game, especially since the reorientation of American party politics as a result of the Civil Rights movement and the defection of the Southern "Dixiecrats" to the Republicans in the 1960s. Whereas previously the Democratic Party represented the utterly populist lash-up of Southern rednecks with North-

ern ethnic constituencies and organized labor, and the even earlier phenomenon of blacks voting for the Republican Party of Lincoln and Grant as a matter of course, today it is taken for granted that black Americans naturally find their political interests expressed in the Democratic Party. But this has worked to ill effect, especially as the "Left" has contributed to the charade.

The election of Barack Obama represents something very difficult for those on the ostensible "Left" to understand, that since the 1960s the Right (in both its Democratic and Republican Party forms) has been very successful in depoliticizing—effectively defusing—the issues of poverty and other forms of social degradation faced by most black Americans. The Left has played into this very well, doing their own work of replacing style for substance and, as Adolph Reed has put it, "posing" for politics. Thus, the "Left" since the 1960s has actually become a part of the *new Right*, a key factor in the depoliticization and hence *conservatizing* of American politics and society, for more than a generation now.

Of course Obama is just as much a product of this conservatism and depoliticization. This should shock no one.—Yet it does, and so this symptom is extremely important to note and understand.

The election of Barack Obama will be an event. It should be a moment for reevaluating American society and politics. It should be an opportunity for throwing overboard illusions the "Left" has sown for at least 40 years about the realities and possibilities for American society and politics. The incredulity with which the Obama election is met, either in hopeful expectation or denial based in fear, is less about his election itself than it is about the confused, mistaken and utterly reactionary consciousness on the American "Left": it is a measure of the racism of the "Left," how this "Left" is a key bulwark of racism in American life.

Note how the Obama candidacy has been met with hostility from all the usual suspects, the sexagenarian post-Civil Rights leadership of Jesse Jackson, Sr. (who said he wanted to cut Obama's balls off!), to the unblinking racist politics of Democratic Party stalwarts like the Clintons (who were "just saying what the Republicans will, anyway"), and those like Rev. Jeremiah Wright who cannot countenance any challenge to the wounded narcissism they've made their profession.—Obama was entirely correct about Wright et al. being stuck in the 1950s. The vested interests of black politics are rightlously wary of Obama. Their game is up. The time for reckoning has come.

So what can be made of this campaign by Obama that completely eschews the business-as-usual of the business of racism in the U.S., and one that does not run politically on the basis of "opposing" the racist demagoguery of the Democrats (like the black Republicans do, making of their "criticism" of black Democratic hucksterism a business of their own, in their own way: see for instance

Shelby Steele on Obama), but rather seeks to bypass such politics?

One catch phrase that has flown in the wake of the success of the Obama candidacy is "post-racial," raising the question of the degree to which America has overcome racism. But perhaps the matter is not one of our historical moment being post-"racial" but rather post-"racist." Perhaps racism has changed. For the historical racism that plagued the U.S., from the failure of the post-Civil War Reconstruction era through Jim Crow until the overcoming of legal racial segregation with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s, is over. But this has not meant the meaningful improvement of conditions of life for the vast majority of black people in America, but rather has accompanied worsening conditions, as part of the broader greater stratification and brutalization of American society in the general downturn since the late 1960s - early '70s. In the meantime, the political issues of racism, as they stood in 1950s-60s, have been rendered obsolete. On the one hand, American society and culture is less "racist" than it has ever been; on the other hand, real suffering is rendered, if not invisible then politically insoluble. There has been "progress" on the issue of "racism" while there has been regress in terms of addressing any problems of greater substance for black people. The hollowed-out politics of "anti-racism" meanwhile has come to serve, at best, the racist politics of black and other Democrats, and at worst a paranoiac narcissistic trap for anyone who might be willing to think radically about political and social change in the U.S.—The more sensible people have done what the rest of America has, come to avoid the madness—or the simple cretinism—of such politics as much as possible.

The degree to which it has at all, American politics and culture has tried to address the social concerns of black people according to a peculiar and confounding mixture of the older Civil Rights and subsequent Black Power political models—think of the successful conflation of the diametrically opposed politics of MLK, Jr. and Malcolm X by Spike Lee, for instance—for an entire generation, without at all improving the lot of the greater portion of black Americans.

This presents a paradox, and the Obama election is a very good emblem for it. For it is truly the case that Obama does not stand at the head of a groundswell of a social movement but rather only a successful marketing tweak of Democratic Party electioneering. The inability to critique Obama without recourse to de-authenticating his "blackness," which everyone feels to be a hollow move, exposes the utter contemptuousness of what stands for "politics" today.—In the end, the election really will hinge on whether Obama as an image makes people feel better than John McCain does. This is an outrage, but not especially outrageous given the state of American politics today. But at least now political symbolism has developed so that the image of a "black man" can be one of jejune

"hope" (and not only for black Americans), and no longer just a jigaboo bugaboo, as the Republicans (and many Democrats) have made it their cynical trade to ply disingenuously and opportunistically for the past generation, finding it an increasingly less successful ploy to pull off today.

Perhaps young [black] people have embraced Obama precisely because they have become so "sick and tired of being sick and tired" with the politics of their parents and grandparents. Perhaps it is enough that Obama means turning the page, even if the basic story remains the same. Change is its own value—if only because it represents an opportunity.—In this case it is the opportunity presented by the failure of "black politics."

The election of Barack Obama will not solve the problems faced by the greater lot of black Americans, but it might at least deliver the *coup de grâce* for a politics that was not working for social improvement anyway. And this should be welcomed—at least by anyone who is honestly concerned with the politics of substantial reform and emancipatory transformation of life in the U.S.

Those on the "Left" who thought it would take a revolution—of whatever kind—to have a black leader have had a profoundly mistaken social imagination. It turns out that racism was not the kind of problem they thought it was. The problems facing black Americans were both less and more intractable than they thought. They have mistaken the political significance of anti-black racism—and black Americans have paid the price for this depoliticization of their social grievances.

The election of Obama will be an event. It is a signal that we need not be held back any longer by the individual illusions the prior "Left" bequeathed us—amidst the botched world they have made. We have been stifled too long under the weight of their obfuscations and rationalizations, while society has gone to hell—or has gone, if you prefer, to "Nixonland" (the title of a recent book by Rick Perlstein): "The Left" has been complicit in the degradation of politics by mirroring the "culture wars" unleashed by the Right, becoming caught up in symbolic imagery, as in the late-'60s Black Power turn, at the expense of real political progress.

As Adolph Reed has pointed out, Obama might indeed represent the "severing" of the "last threads" potentially linking anti-racist and anti-capitalist politics. But the specific ways these have been "linked" in the social imagination and politics—the *ideology*—of the "Left," for more than a generation, have not helped but actually worked to the detriment of either addressing the social problems faced by most black Americans or addressing the problems of capitalism in the U.S.

Perhaps the very attempt to address these two sets of issues in identical terms, as if struggling against racism and capitalism were not only indissolubly linked but were somehow the same thing, fudging the issue of *how* to articulate them, was the mistake, especially as the struggle

against racism and for "black empowerment" came, since the late '60s, to *take the place* of the struggle for working class empowerment and against capitalism.

Capitalist politics since the 1960s has succeeded in effectively separating, neutralizing and eliminating both agendas, empowering working class people and ameliorating social conditions for black people, and both in the name of "black politics," which today does not require *reform* but *abolition*. "Black politics" has done nothing to empower black working-class people, but only to chain them, in a more or less roundabout way, to the Democratic Party and its capitalist politics. So we do not need "better" black politics, but rather to overcome such politics entirely. We have stood sorely in need of a specifically *working class politics* that can effectively speak to [black] workers comprehensively, to all aspects of their social reality and political empowerment.

This need can be found reflected in the fact that Obama leads in the current electoral polls of all lower-income people, including more than 10 points among "white" workers.—So much for the specter of the supposedly so intractable racism of the "white working class"